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## CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

28 July 1954

STAFF MEMORANDUM NO. 57-54

SUBJECT: The Case Against Estimates of Soviet Vulnerabilities

1. The desire has been expressed recurrently in the intelligence community and among some of our consumers for an estimate on Soviet vulnerabilities. This desire appears motivated at least by partly the belief that our Soviet estimates to date present too monolithic a picture of Soviet strength, in which weaknesses have not been sufficiently pointed out. In addition, certain operational purposes could be served by a specialized vulnerability paper. However, for a number of reasons we believe that a national estimate of Soviet vulnerabilities would be methodologically unsound, and probably deceptive.

2. Our principal reason for this belief is the fact that a vulnerability connotes an operational rather than a factual condition. It is not a weakness per se but an exploitable weakness, the exploitability of which changes with circumstances and with the capabilities of the exploiter. Thus a weakness may cease to be exploitable and another may become exploitable, or the degree of exploitability may vary. Therefore, it is almost impossible to estimate a vulnerability with any confidence unless detailed assumptions regarding Western exploitative capabilities and objectives are given. Since each vulnerability problem is unique,

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defined by its own peculiar circumstances, general assumptions can hardly be employed as a basis for an estimate. Consequently, vulnerability is a concept which is properly in the province of operational people who have available to them not only the intelligence studies of Soviet weaknesses but also knowledge of US capabilities to exploit them.

3. While national intelligence estimates, which by their nature are brief, generalized products designed for a high policy audience, do not contain detailed analyses of Communist weaknesses. Our numerous estimates of Bloc capabilities have not neglected to point out and analyse them. NIE 11-4-54, for example, lists the following weaknesses: top level instability, failures in economic planning, low productivity, discontent in the USSR, low living standards, constant state control and surveillance, peasant discontent, shortcomings in Bloc military establishments, Satellite disaffection, low morale, housing and manpower problems, certain Bloc dependences on trade with the West, Soviet-Chinese divisive forces, and others. We have also discussed the weaknesses of the various Communist parties and organizations abroad in appropriate regional and country studies.

4. However, we believe it would be seriously misleading to discuss such weaknesses in a separate paper on vulnerabilities. In the first place, by listing them separately we run the risk of magnifying them

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out of proportion. When they are discussed in our regular Bloc papers, the compensating strength or checks in the Soviet system are presented simultaneously and the reader is placed in a position to evaluate the weaknesses more correctly. In the second place, to discuss weaknesses separately under the heading of vulnerabilities is to imply that we are talking about exploitable weaknesses. The fact is that not all weaknesses which might be listed would be exploitable by means available to the US and therefore could not properly be regarded as vulnerabilities. While there exist many weaknesses within the Soviet system which are theoretically exploitable (e.g., low living standards, anti-Russian sentiments of the Satellite peoples, abuse of police power), the authority of a totalitarian police state as firmly entrenched in power as the Kremlin is unlikely to be seriously impaired by psychological pressures and inducements. Nor is the Soviet system conducive to resistance by disaffected citizens.

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5. In view of these considerations, including the fact that the mass of technical details would have to be discussed in any useful Bloc weakness analysis belong rather to the field of operational research than to a national estimate, we believe that over-all estimates of Soviet vulnerabilities would not be a useful exercise.

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Prepared by EE Staff

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